

17. BEHAVIOURAL RESPONSE OF A MALE MAGPIE-ROBIN
(*COPSYCHUS SAULARIS* SCLATER) TO ITS OWN SONG

The observations were carried out during May 1982 at Pazayannur village in the Trichur district of Kerala. A pair of magpie-robins had nested in a bulbless street lamp-shade and the favourite-singing perch of the male magpie-robin was the electric wire leading to the lamp post. The recording of the song was done by suitably placing a battery operated portable cassette tape recorder with a built-in microphone on first floor veranda of a building with grills almost on all sides which permitted birds to enter and leave easily. From this vantage point an excellent view could be obtained of the lamp post nest of the magpie-robins as well as a 50 year old peepul tree located 60 feet from the veranda but whose branches reached to within 20 feet of it. During the period of this observation the peepul tree was fruiting and was frequented by many species of birds.

The recordings included the calls and songs of all the singing birds of the vicinity, but the song of the male magpie-robin predominated especially during early mornings. During a test replay of about an hour's recording at very low volume the male magpie-robin sitting on the electric wire about ten feet away was found to puff up on hearing its own song. This was followed by a direct flight towards me when I was holding the recorder, and a few swift criss-cross flights close over my head with pecking attempts.

In order to see the bird's reaction to other birds singing its song, three dummy bird models, one resembling as closely as possible a magpie-robin and the other two resembling a myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) and a black drongo (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) respectively were set up prominently on the grill at 15 feet in-

tervals and the recorder replaying the male magpie-robin song was placed close to each dummy one after another. In these experiments the magpie-robin tended to ignore the dummies altogether.

In the first instance the robin landed within three inches of the recorder, ignoring the dummy robin, puffed up several times while hopping around the recorder subjecting it to close scrutiny. No attempt was made to attack the recorder itself. With the other two dummies the reaction was progressively less pronounced with the bird appearing in the balcony in a puffed up state but without bothering to examine the recorder further. These observations were made from a concealed place behind a window of a nearby room. A complete disregard for the visual image (stuffed bird) and a keen attraction for the source of the sound was clearly evident.

Prolonged observations showed that the behavioural response of the male magpie-robin to its own song had three phases. The immediate response was anger with the bird puffing up and flying straight towards the source of the song in a clearly aggressive manner. On the replay being continued the initial anger and aggressiveness was followed by a period of confusion with the bird perching and flying restlessly in the vicinity of the source while attempting to sing. Repeated exposures to its own song accustomed the bird to it and was even found to stimulate it to sing. Henry (1975) has mentioned somewhat similar behaviour during encounters between rival male magpie-robins with the birds attempting to outsing each other. In the present observations the prolonged exposure to its own song acted only as a stimulant for the male magpie-robin to

sing. Such artificially stimulated songs were of shorter duration and seemed less inspired. There was no attempt to outsing the tape recorder. Whether this muted behavioural reaction was due to the bird having recognised the song as its own or having realised the mechanical origin of the song remains to be found out.

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Only the fixed station song (Salim Ali 1960) that elaborately was sung by the male magpie-robin in the mornings between 5.30 and 6.30 were played back in these experiments.

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18. MOUSE, A NEST-PARASITE OF BAYA WEAVER BIRD
(*PLOCEUS PHILIPPINUS* L.)

(With three text-figures)

During my field surveys for indigenous palm species, I came across a few Baya weaver bird (*Ploceus philippinus*) colonies nesting on telegraph wire (Fig. 1). Baya nesting on telegraph wires or on live power lines have been recorded by Ambedkar (1970), Betts (1952), Davis (1971, 1978) and Kirkpatrick (1952). A colony on telegraph line noticed by Devadanam, Ramnad District, Tamilnadu in early July 1981, revealed a curious phenomenon. By May-June, the nests were deserted by the weaver birds since the breeding season was already over by them. But a number of nests were found parasitized by a species of mouse (*Mus* sp.) common in Tamilnadu, for its breeding purpose (Fig. 2). Watching about a dozen semi-adult mice moving around the deserted Baya nests was a spectacular sight.

To satisfy my curiosity, I pulled down some nests with a bamboo pole, when alas! dozens of still younger mice fell down from different nests in the sugarcane field below. However, none of them could walk along the wire even for a short distance. Eventhough I have not seen an adult passing along the wire in order to have ground contact for foraging, I was told by eye witness that the mice move from the nests to the ground and vice-versa only during nights. In the colony which I watched, the mice had to move along the wire to a distance of not less than 10 m to reach the nearest pole for climbing down. Thus, the adult mice seem eminently adapted to climbing posts and walking on wire. Moreover, the adult mice have no need to carry food for the young ones, which would